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THE LADY OF THE HEAVENS.

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(Continued.)

"The bird has the right to fly, but what if it is in a cage, Zoola?"

"I am queen here, Nole; the bars will burst at my word."

"It may be so, Zoola, but what if the bird should find that it has no need to fly to?"

"What do you mean?" asked Rachel palling.

"Only that it seems best that you should not anger the Zulus, Lady."

"I should like to see you try to destroy your nest, thinking that you might come to love this cage. No, no, I have heard nothing, but I guess their thoughts. You need rest; bide here where you are safe a day or two, and let us see what happens."

"Speak plainly, Nole. I do not understand your parable of birds and cages."

"Zoola, I obey. I think that if you say you will go, none, not the King himself, would dare to stay you there; you would have to go on foot, for then that horse would die. But an impi would go with you, or before you, and would bet those who held you from returning to Zululand! Do you understand me now?"

"Yes," answered Rachel. "You remain here a few days. I will remain here a few days."

So she arose and bathed herself and was dressed by Nole, and ate of the food that he brought her, and opened the door of the hut. Then she went out, and in the little courtyard found a litter waiting that was hung round with green mats.

"The King's word is that you should enter the litter," said Nole.

She did so, whereon Nole clapped her hands and girls in head dresses ran in and hung the litter about herself before the litter, lifted it up and carried it away, Nole walking at its head.

Rachel, peeping between the mats, saw that she was borne out of the town, surrounded, but at a distance, by a guard of hundreds of armed men. Presently they began to ascend a hill, whereon grew many trees, and after climbing it for a while, reached a large kraal with huts between the outer and inner fence, and behind it a great space of park-like land through which ran a stream.

Here, by the banks of the stream, stood a large new hut, and behind it a little distance two or three other huts. In front of this great hut the litter was set down by the bearers, who at once went away.

Nole's bidding Rachel came out of it and looked at the place which had been given her in which to dwell.

It was a beautiful spot, away from the dust and noise of the Great Kraal, and so placed upon a shoulder of the hillside that the soldiers who guarded this house of the Inkosazana, as it was called, could not be seen.

Yet Rachel looked at it with distaste, feeling that it was that cage of which Nole had spoken. A solitary cage, for here Rachel abode in regal seclusion and in state that could only be called awful. No man might approach her house unbidden, and the maidens who waited upon her did so with downcast eyes, never speaking, and falling on their knees if addressed.

On the first day of her seclusion, Rachel, who was seated alone, heard some shouts of rage and horror, and saw soldiers running towards him, and in another minute body was being carried away upon a shield. He had died for his sacrilege.

Once a day ambassadors came to her from the King to ask of her health, and if she had orders to give, but now even these men were not allowed to look upon her. They were led in by the women, each of them with a piece of black cloth over her head, and from beneath this cloth they addressed her as though she were in truth divine.

On the first day she bade them tell the King that her mission being ended, it was her desire to depart to her own home beyond the river. They heard her words in silence, then asked if she had anything to add. She replied, "Yes, it was her will that they should cease to wear veils in her presence, also that no more men should be killed upon her account as had happened that morning. They said that they would convey the order at once, as several were under sentence of death, who had argued as to whether she were really the Inkosazana. So she sent them away instantly, fearing lest they should be too late, and they were led off backwards, bowing and giving the royal salute. Afterwards she rejoiced to hear that her commands had arrived just in time, and that the blood of these poor people was not upon her head.

Next day the messengers returned at the same hour, unveiled as she desired, bearing the answer of the King and his council. It was to the effect that the Inkosazana had no need to ask permission to come or to go. Her Spirit, they knew, was mighty, and could wander where it willed; all the impis of the Zulus could not hold her Spirit. But—and here came the sting of this clever answer—it was necessary, until her sayings had been considered, that the body in which that Spirit abode should remain with them.

Therefore the King and his councilors said that they would be satisfied with the sending of her Spirit across the Tugela, leaving her body to dwell in a space in the House of the Inkosazana.

Rachel looked at them in despair, for what was she to reply to such reasoning as this? Nole had been made up her mind, their spokesman said that a white man, Ibubesi, who said that he had often spoken with her, asked leave to visit her in her house.

Now Rachel thought a while. Ishmael was the last person in the whole world whom she wished to see. After the interview when they parted, and all that had happened since, it could not be otherwise. She remembered the threats he had uttered then, and to her father afterwards, the brutal and revolting threats. Some of these had been directed against Nole, and subsequently Nole was killed by the Zulus. That those directed at herself had not been fulfilled was, she felt sure, due to a lack of opportunity alone.

Little wonder, then, that she feared and hated the man. Still he was of white blood, and perhaps for this reason had authority among the Zulus, who, as she knew, often consulted him. Moreover, notwithstanding his vapourings, like the Zulus whose superstitions he had contracted, he looked upon herself with something akin to fear. If she saw him she had no cause to dread anything that he could do to her, at any rate while she was in the house which was supreme, whereas on the other hand she might obtain information from him which would be very useful, or make use of him to enable her to escape from Zululand. On the whole, then, it seemed wisest to grant him an interview, especially as she gathered from the fact that the question was raised by Dingaan's indunas that for some reason of his own, the King hoped that she would do so.

Still she hesitated, loathing and despising him as she did.

"You have heard," she said in English to Nole, who stood behind her, "Now what shall I say?"

"Say—come," answered Nole in the same tongue. "Read his black heart and find out truth, he can help you from you. Say—come with soldiers. If he behave bad, tell them kill him. They obey you. No mind me. I not afraid of that will be with me."

Then Rachel said to the indunas: "I hear the King's word, and understand that he wishes me to receive this Ibubesi. Yet I know that, as I am an evil man, white and black, he is an evil man, and it is not my pleasure to speak with him alone. Let him come with a guard of six captains, and let the captains be armed with spears, so that if I give the word, there may be an end of this Ibubesi."

Then the messengers saluted and departed as before.

On the morrow at about the same hour a praier, or herald, arrived outside the inner fence of the kraal, and after he had shouted out Rachel's titles, attributes, beauties and supernatural powers for at least ten minutes, he himself, repeating, announced that the indunas of the King were without accompanied by the white man Ibubesi, awaiting her permission to enter the kraal through Nole, and the horn wand in her hand, seated herself upon a carved stool in front of the great hut. Presently an altercation arose upon the further side of the reed fence in which she recognized Ibubesi's strident voice, mingled with the deeper tones of the Zulus, who seemed to be in a great rage.

"They command him to take off his headress," said Nole, "and threaten to beat him if he will not."

"Go, then, to them to admit him as he is, that I may see his face, and learn if he be the white man whom I knew, or another," answered Rachel, and she went out.

Then the gate was opened and the messengers were led in by women. After these came six captains, carrying spears, and the white man Ibubesi, and last of all Ishmael himself. Rachel's whole nature shrank at the sight of his dark, handsome features, and the look of anger which shone in his eyes. He was dressed in a white ostrich feather in it, both of them now much the worse for wear, which she remembered so well. Also he had a light pipe in his mouth. Presently one of the captains appeared to become suddenly aware of this pipe for stretching out his hand, he snatched it away, and then he turned to look upon the ground. Ishmael, whose teeth and lips were hurt, turned on the man with an oath and struck him, whereon the captain raised his foot on the hat and pipe. Then Ishmael came forward and said awkwardly:

"How do you do? I did not expect to see you here," and he devoured her beauty with his bold, greedy eyes, though not without doubt and dread.

Taking no notice of his greeting, she said in a cold voice:

"I have sent for you here to ask if you have any reason as to why I should not be allowed to give, but now your crime against my servant, Nole, and therefore against me?"

Now Ishmael paled, for he had not expected such a welcome, and began to deny the thing.

"Spare your falsehoods," went on Rachel. "Have it from the King's lips, and from my own knowledge, remember only that here I am the Inkosazana with power of life and death. If I speak the word, or point at you with this wand, in a minute you will have gone to your account."

"Inkosazana or not," he answered in a cowed voice, "you know too much about me to fear me. I have killed your life, and you see that the plan was good, for you came, and," he pleaded, "governing some of his insolence and familiarity; 'we are here together, two white people among all these silly niggers.'"

Rachel looked him up and down; then she looked at the indunas seated in silence before her, at the great-limbed captains, and their broad spears beyond, reminding her in their plumes and attitudes of some picture that she had seen of Roman gladiators about to die. Lastly she looked at the delicately-shaped Nole by her side, with her sweet, inscrutable face, the woman whose parents and kin this outcast had brought to a bloody end, the woman whom to forward his base ends he had vilely striven to murder. Slowly she looked at them all and at him, and said:

"Shall I explain to these nobles and captains what you call them, and what you are called among your own people? Shall I tell them something of your story, Mr. Ishmael?"

"You can do what you like," he answered sullenly. "You know why I got you here—because I love you. I told you that many months ago. While you were down at Ramah I had no chance with you, because of that old hypocrite of a her of yours, and that black girl," and he looked at Nole viciously. "Here I thought that it would be different—that you would be glad of my company, that you have turned about into a kind of goddess and hold me off," and he paused.

"Go on," said Rachel.

"I'll right, I will. You may think yourself a goddess as I do myself sometimes. But I know that you are a woman too, and that soon you will get tired of this business. You want to home—your father and mother, don't you? Well, you can't. You are a prisoner here for these fools have got it into their heads that you are such a witch, and that it would be unlucky to let you out of the country. So here you must stop, for years, perhaps, or till they are sick of you and kill you. Just understand, Rachel, that nobody can help you to escape except me, and that I shan't do so for nothing."

Rachel straightened herself upon her seat, gripping the edge of it with her hands, for her temper was rising, while Nole bent forward and said something in her ear.

"What is that black devil whispering to you?" he asked. "Telling you to have me killed, I expect. Well, you don't, for what would your body be such a say? It would be murder, wouldn't it, and you would go to hell, where I daresay you come from, for any rate you could never be such a witch? Look here," he went on, changing his tone, "don't let's squabble. Make it up with me, I'll get you clear of this and marry you afterwards on the square. If you won't, it will be the worse for you—and everybody else, yes, everybody else."

"Mr. Ishmael," answered Rachel calmly, "you are making a very great mistake, about my scruples as to taking life I mean, amongst other things. Once when it was necessary, you saw to it, what I did then I will do again, only not with my own hand. Mr. Ishmael, you said just now that you

could get me out of Zululand. I take you at your word, not for my own sake, for I am comfortable enough here, but for that of my father and mother who will be anxious," and her voice weakened a little as she spoke of them, repeating, "I will hear no more."

"Do you? Well, I won't. I am comfortable here also, and shall be more so as the husband of the Inkosazana. This is a very pretty kraal, and it is quite big enough for two," he added with an amorous sneer.

Now for a minute at least Rachel sat still and rigid. When she spoke again it was in a kind of gasp:

"Never," she said, "have you gone nearer to your death, you wanderer without name, than when you asked me to give you one week to arrange my escape home. If it is not done within that time, I will pay you back for those words. Be silent, I will hear no more."

Then she called out:

"Rise, men, and bear the message of the Inkosazana to Dingaan, 'King of the Zulus. Say to Dingaan that this wandering white dog whom he has sent into my house, has done me insult, and that he has asked me, the Inkosazana, to be one of his wives.'"

At these words the counselors and captains uttered a shout of rage, and the noise raised by the Zulus of the arm lifting their spears to plunge them into him. Rachel waved her hand and they let them fall again.

"Not yet," she said. "Take him to the King, and if my word comes to the King, then he dies, and not till then. I would not have his vile blood on my hands. Unless I speak, I, Queen of the Heavens, leave him to the vengeance of the Heavens. My mantle is over him, lead him back to the King and let me see his face no more."

"We hear and it shall be so," they answered with one voice, then forgetting their ceremony hustled Ishmael from the kraal.

"Have I done well?" asked Rachel of Nole, when they were alone.

"No, Zoola, she answered, 'you should have killed the snake while you were hot against him, since when your blood grows cold you can never do it, and he will live to bite you.'"

"Will he be afraid of you when you are both across the Tugela?" asked Nole. "Inkosazana, give me power to ask no questions. Ibubesi killed my father and mother and brethren, and has tried to kill me. Therefore my heart would not be sore if, after some fashion of this kind, I paid him spears for battle-axes, for he deserves to die."

"Perhaps, Nole, but not by my word."

"Perhaps by your hand, then," said Nole, looking at her curiously. "Well, soon or late he will die a red death—the redder of death," he learned that from the spirit of my father."

"The spirit of your father?" said Rachel, looking at her.

"Certainly, it speaks to me often and tells me many things, though I may not repeat them to you till they are accomplished. Thus I was not to raise the name of Dingaan, for it told me that you would save me."

"I wish it would speak to me and tell me when I can go home," said Rachel with a sigh.

"It would if it could, Zoola, but it cannot because the curtain is too thick. Had all you loved been slain before your eyes, then the veil would be worn thin as mine is, and through it, you who are akin to them, would hear the talk of the ghosts, and dimly see them wandering beneath their trees."

"Beneath their trees!"

"Yes, the trees of their life, of which all the boughs are deeds and all the leaves are words, and the shadow of which they must abide for ever. My people could tell you of those trees, and perhaps they will one day when we meet here. Nay, I pay no heed, I was wandering in my talk. It is the sight of that wild beast, Ibubesi, you will not let me kill him, and doubtless it is fated so. I think one day you will be sorry—but too late."

(To be Continued.)

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